



## CHURCH RETREATS HAVE RICH HISTORY, IMPORTANT PLACE

Church retreats are a tradition that goes back to the origins of camping itself and the “Brush Arbor” movement early in the previous century. But why exactly are church retreats so effective? It is the lack of distractions. Retreats are so productive because a retreat provides the opportunity for a concentrated time focused on spiritual objectives and relationships in a setting removed from the distractions of everyday life.

Let me give an example. Not long ago, I was involved in what turned into a protracted process to

work out the details of a lease for some camp buildings. The process took almost nine months, mostly because of the delays in dealing with each message and proposal as they worked themselves between two principals and their attorneys. A message to the principal could wait for hours or days depending on the work load of the principal. After consideration, the message would then be passed to their attorney, who was dealing with it along with his other clients. A response would eventually filter back through the same process in



pressing needs. You are away from it all.

Retreats work for all ages and for a variety of purposes. Adult retreats, especially women’s retreats, are great for building relationships and focusing on spiritual needs. That is why they are so effective for groups like Alpha. Youth groups also benefit especially because of the opportunities for leaders to build relationships with students during the course of a weekend, which is simply not possible two hours at a time with a week in between.

Church retreats are a great way to accomplish many of the objectives of church ministries through a period of time away focused on relationships and spiritual development, without the daily distractions of our busy lives.

*Kirk Potter is Retreat Center Director at The Firs Camps and Retreats, Bellingham, Washington*

reverse, get passed back to us and on to our attorney. It took months.

By comparison, a good friend of mine’s father was a partner in a major development and construction company, which was involved in building and sometimes owning downtown sky scrapers and shopping malls. When negotiations commenced for a project, they all met in a neutral setting for several days of face-to-face negotiations with all the parties and lawyers at the table. In a matter of days, they processed complexities light-years more advanced than my lease project. The difference; no distractions, no interruptions, no other clients, no other competing priorities, and no family responsibilities during that time period. As well, the productivity resulting from the trust relationships built in these face-to-face settings was not possible at the end of e-mail, telephone calls, and brief meetings.

Retreats are similar. A weekend retreat is worth months of Sundays and mid-week meetings because of the lack of gaps and distractions. Add to this the relationships built as you share the retreat experience with others over a concentrated time, and the effectiveness of the retreat is even more pronounced.

The concept of a retreat is not unlike that of a vacation. You set aside all the distractions of everyday life for a time away dedicated to a particular purpose, which often includes developing and deepening relationships with family and others. Add to this the pleasures of someone else doing

the cooking, serving and clearing tables, taking care of the dishes and child care in some cases. It is almost like going out to eat five times in one weekend with a group of friends. There is ample opportunity to sit around the tables and have a nice chat. There are no

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# PLANNING FOR SUCCESS MONTH-BY-MONTH GUIDE

In any endeavor, failure to plan is planning to fail. This is especially true when it comes to a group retreat. The timeline for retreat promotion and registration may be several months. Below is a sample timeline:

**Four months:** Church establishes a “coordinator.” The coordinator will want to ask for volunteers to be responsible for the areas of finances, registration, promotion, program, site selection, food, etc. There is truth to the sentence: Many hands make light work. Leaders need to remember when asking people to serve that the benefit to serving is the personal relationships that develop within the church.

**Three months:** Retreat center websites often have a promotional kit on line for their groups to use for newsletter articles and bulletin inserts. Coordinator needs to



publish dates early so people can schedule their schedule around the retreat. The coordinator needs to host a meeting with participants to provide financial deadlines and early bird discounts, schedule, travel details, etc. and provide time for those

interested to ask questions. A coordinator needs to be sure that financial guidelines are clear and offer incentives to register early. Leaders need to promote retreats on social media such as facebook and twitter. and through church literature.



**Two months:** On a Sunday morning or in Sunday school class, have past attendees share their personal testimonies concerning retreat experience from previous year. This will increase interest and increase the possibility of donations of scholarship money. Pictures are worth a million words. The promotion leader may ask past attendees to email pictures of the previous retreat or camp to the coordinator to organize a power point slide presentation for viewing before, during or after the service. The coordinator needs to make a special effort to personally invite students or adults. This can make all the dif-

ference in their decision to come.  
**One month:** The registration leader may organize a “Retreat Sunday” with someone to take registrations. The leader may also organize a pancake breakfast or a baked potato luncheon on that day to provide awareness for others to pray for the students who are to attend camp.  
**One Week After:** Ask the participants to share about their retreat experience with others. Fellow members will be much more willing the following year to support you in your efforts when seeing how the retreat has revitalized attendees!

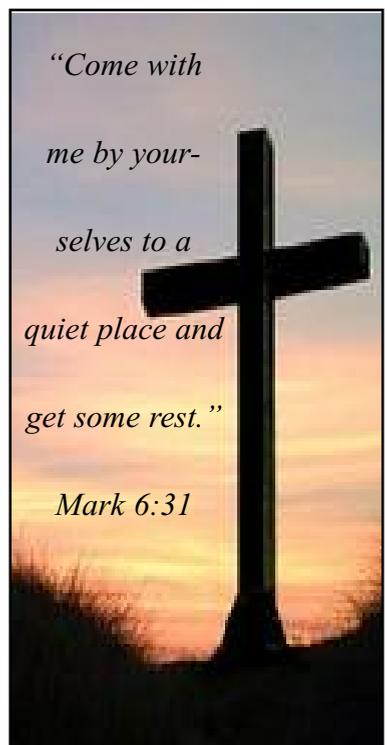
## HOW TO MAKE A RETREAT PERSONALLY EFFECTIVE

1. Choose a quiet place that offers comfort and the minimum of distractions but that makes it easy to break up your retreat time into short sessions with fun interludes between.
2. Schedule yourself loosely. If we bring the same busy schedule we are addicted to at home into our experience we will get very little out of it. Retreats are like Sabbath, meant to renew our connection to God and revitalize our relationships to each other.
3. Retreat with a friend or spouse. God speaks not just through scripture but also through those around us. Others can help us evaluate the effectiveness of our contemplative practices and their role in stirring our imagination.
4. Spend time in prayer and scripture reading. This can take many forms. You may like to start

- with a familiar psalm or gospel portion, or choose to read through a book of the bible.
5. Keep a journal. What are you grateful for? What was your biggest struggle? Where have you paid attention to God in your life this week? Use this material as foundations for your retreat process. You will find this is a wonderful way to explore the threads God is weaving in your life.
6. Break up your retreat time into “sittings” (or sessions). Normally these should not be for more than an hour; stop while you’re still enjoying it. Consider these sessions “prayer periods”—times of more formal interaction with God.
7. Between sessions, enjoy doing something that doesn’t require concentration such as taking a

- walk or hike. Do not do anything that distracts you like checking your texts or surfing the internet.
8. Use your retreat to create tangible goals for the next few months. Set goals for your spiritual life, personal well being, relationships, ministry, gardening and relaxation.

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